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## WILHELM LEIBL.

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ENGRAVED BY T. JOHNSON. — FROM A PHOTOGRAPH.

*The Present Condition of German Art*, "and the Academies were indeed the most active propagators of the colorism imported from Belgium and from France; and which is about equivalent to realism. To-day the victory of realism in color is decided along the whole line. The striving after the ideal in the sense of modern German art is only to be found in the choice of subjects and the treatment of form, and this latter is more and more neglected, or at least is transferred into the vulgarly sensual sphere of slavish truth to the model, by naturalism, which is an outgrowth of the left wing of realism." One is forcibly reminded by these words of the Biblical representations of Eduard von Gebhardt, in which, indeed, the subject is the only "ideal" element left. Speaking of this artist's *Last Supper* in *L'Art*, M. Charles Tardieu characterizes it as follows: "This is not, perhaps, the historical Last Supper, any more than the ideal Last Supper, and still less is it the academical Last Supper, on which score we highly congratulate M. von Gebhardt. It might pass for a conclave of socialistic workingmen, filled with fear by the rigors of late Prussian legislation, and betrayed by a son of Israel in the pay of the Berlin police." But is not this realism, yea, even this naturalism, which is in such bad

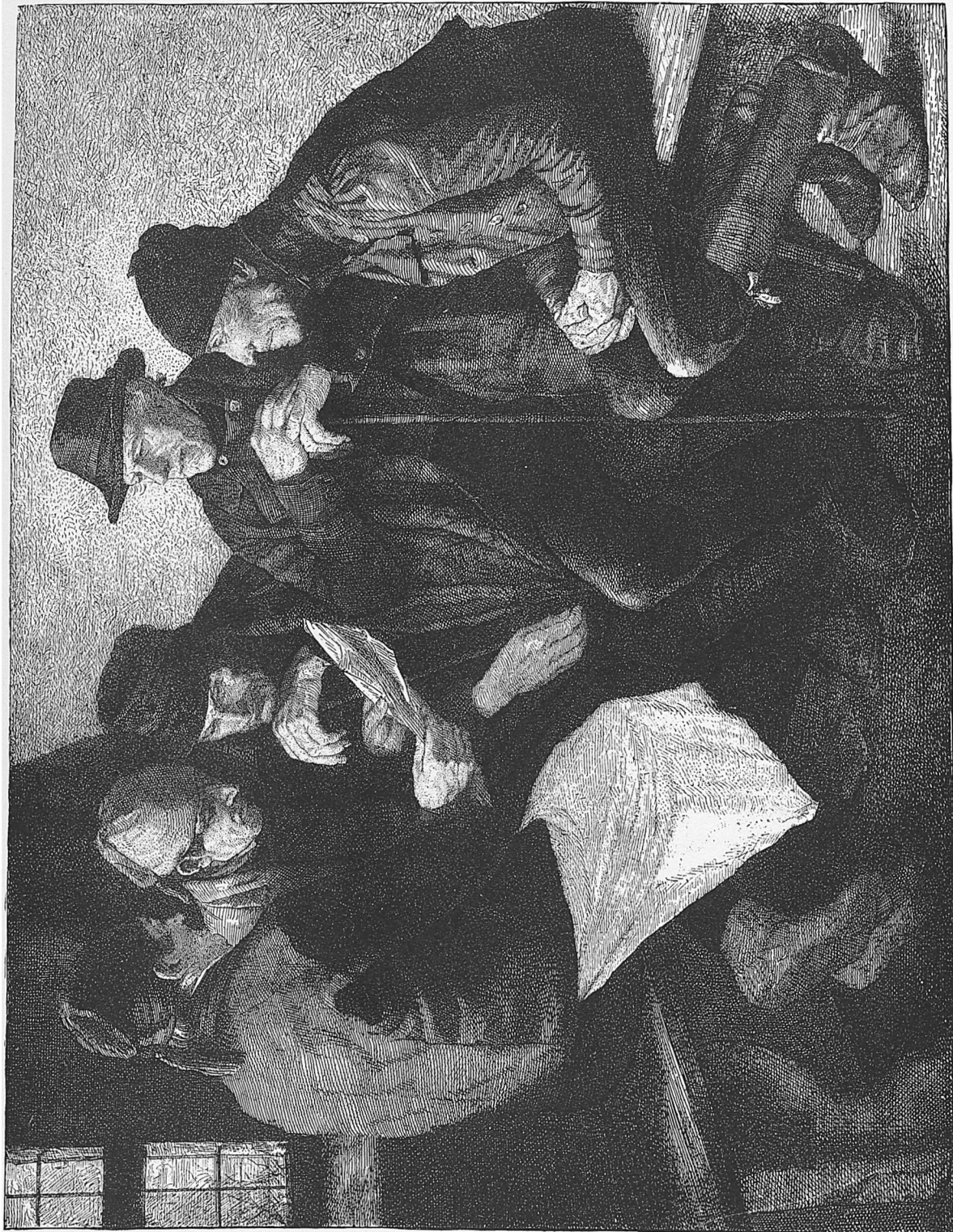
GERMANY used to pride itself upon its idealism. It was the boast of German patriots that this idealism had overthrown the power of the first Napoleon; Germany was looked upon as the stronghold of modern transcendental philosophy; and, if it was conceded that the French artists were superior in technical skill, and in the ability to seize the outward characteristics of form, a consolation was found in the firm belief that it was only the exuberance of ideas which prevented the artists of Germany from giving due attention to the more material side of art. "All our great idealists," said Professor Lübke, in a lecture on *Modern French Art*, delivered in 1872, "how far did they remain behind the French [idealists] in form, and yet how far superior are they in substance!" But things have changed somewhat in this respect. The policy of "blood and iron" is of the extreme practical sort, scientific materialism has found its most valiant champions in men like Büchner, Vogt, and Haeckel, and now German idealism is assailed even in art. "Berlin, Düsseldorf, and Munich maintained very nearly the same repellent attitude towards the so-called ideal tendency," says Adolf Rosenberg, speaking of

odor with the one-sided partisans of idealism, a marked feature of all thoroughly German art? Does it not penetrate every line drawn and every stroke painted by Dürer? Look at St. Peter, for instance, in the *Little Passion*, as he lies fast asleep, and evidently snoring, with his mouth open, in the garden at Gethsemane, or at the scene of the birth of the Virgin, in *The Life of the Virgin*, with its beer-drinking women, which might pass for a similar scene in any well-to-do burgher's house in Nuremberg during the sixteenth century. There surely is more of the spirit of Albert Dürer in works like the one just described than in the Pre-Raphaelitic conceptions of an Overbeck; and it would be much nearer to the truth, therefore, to speak of this latest development of German art as a return to its original sources, rather than to call it a turning away from the right path.

There is another phase of German art, however, which is still more radical than the one I have alluded to, in its rupture with the traditions of the first half of the century. It is the naturalism which Mr. Rosenberg stigmatizes as an outgrowth of the left wing of realism. While Eduard von Gebhardt's compositions readily recall Dürer's works, in which idealism and realism exist side by side without ever succeeding in forming a homogeneous whole, this other phase, which bears more of the impress of completeness, because it has still further eliminated the incongruous element of idealism, finds a parallel in Holbein. Holbein—although he falls far short of Dürer in wealth of ideas—is the greater of the two German luminaries of the sixteenth century, from an artistic, or, if you will, technical point of view, because nothing diverted his attention from the truthful and simple observation of nature. Dürer had a luxuriant fancy, which sought expression in multitudes of compositions. Holbein's compositions almost disappear among the mass of his portraits. When he did compose, he composed to order, and carried into his work all the truth to life that was the fruit of his naturalism. But still, who has ever been able to explain the inner meaning of his Meyer Madonna? In the *Pictures of Death* the case is different, because the ideas were supplied to him.

Of this modern German naturalism Wilhelm Leibl is the foremost representative. It is reported of him on good authority that he carries his antipathy to idealism to a positive dislike of ideas. He is displeased to hear people talk of ideas in his pictures. He does not want ideas in them. All he desires to do is *to paint*, that is to say, to represent Nature as she appears to him, purely and simply. Shall we reproach the artist for this prosaic estimate of his high calling? "The revolution which has been enacted within the realm of subjects open to painting," says Mr. Rosenberg in the article before quoted, "was only the result of the change which has taken place in the intellectual conditions of the time. The reproaches of those who denounce the want of ideal aspirations, the poverty of thought of modern art, must not, therefore, be levelled against the artists as a separate class;—they apply, on the contrary, to the whole intellectual current of our time, the force of which the artist can withstand least of all, and which, we must admit, if we would be just, he ought not to withstand." This is a view of the case which it is well to bear in mind in the presence of the prevalent talk about the decline of art. If we should all become aware that we live in glass houses, there might possibly be less throwing of stones! But one is tempted to ask: Is not the fervent love of nature, amounting almost to reverence, a sufficient excuse for and explanation of this art? What we love truly, we love for its own sake; we would have it as it is, and not otherwise.

However this may be, Wilhelm Leibl, has made for himself a position which has long been recognized outside of his own country. Among the young Americans who have lately come back from Munich there is hardly a name which excites as much enthusiasm as that of this artist, and his extraordinary powers have been freely acknowledged even in France. One of the best-known pictures which Mr. Leibl has painted up to the present is entitled *Peasants Reading*. It was exhibited at the Exposition Universelle at Paris, in 1878, and thence passed into the private collection of Mr. Stewart. I prefer to give a French estimate of the picture, which we can judge of only by the etching published in *L'Art*, of which a phototype reproduction is



W. LEIBL, PINX.

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## PEASANTS READING.

The Original in the Possession of Mr. William H. Stewart.

(PHOTOTYPIC REPRODUCTION OF AN ETCHING IN "L'ART.")

given herewith. M. Charles Tardieu writes of the *Peasants* in the journal just named: "They simply, we had almost said stupidly, read the paper. These are not village statesmen or communal representatives,—they are well-meaning, unpretentious rustics, who, to rest themselves from the labors of the week, listen inertly and passively to the reading of the Sunday paper in which one of their number is looking up the city news and the latest market reports. They are ugly, and, worse than that, insignificant, and their rude habiliments are free from any theatrical trumpery. They are not even artistically grouped; it seems rather as if the painter had somewhat coquettishly sought to represent them with all the commonplace dulness of their physiognomies, in all the *naïveté* of their attitudes, without posing, without any thought of arrangement. How is it, then, that with so little we are satisfied and impressed? How is it that this subject—which really is no subject at all—is in itself sufficient? It is because these *Peasants* are true, because we have seen them yesterday, and shall see them again to-morrow, and because we may be sure we shall recognize them. It is because they do well and completely what they are engaged in. It is because in this picture the human animal, to use an expression *à la mode*, is studied with rare vigor; it is because the execution, besides emphasizing the rusticity of the types delineated with a remarkable power of penetration and in even the smallest details, has in itself a value of its own, a personal stamp, which energetically impresses itself upon the reality, but without altering it. We find only one defect in this powerful painting, and that is the apron of one of the figures, the crude white of which makes a hole in the picture." Of the artist's capacity as a portrait-painter the same critic adds: "While M. Knaus, a prolific and captivating novelist, fails in the portrait, M. Leibl, less seductive and less inventive, is essentially a portrait-painter. The two male portraits which he exhibited at the Salon of 1878 attracted a great deal of attention. His name was first made known to the public outside of Germany at the International Art Exhibition of 1869, to which he also sent some portraits of striking truthfulness. But the talent of this artist has singularly strengthened and developed since then. A conscientious, patient, and profound observer, he has that rare merit of being able to seize the infinitely small in expression and modelling, without neglecting to make evident the characteristic aspects of the individuality he is studying. In this scientific and minute analysis he seems to dissect life, but only to be enabled to reconstruct it all the better."

Another of the artist's paintings, *The Old Peasant and His Daughter*, is represented by the accompanying wood-cut, executed from a photograph. According to another version it is entitled *The Sweetheart*. But the inferences to be drawn from this second title are of so unpleasant a nature that the first seemed preferable.

It is as yet impossible for us to know Mr. Leibl in his paintings, which are acknowledged to be masterpieces also from a purely technical point of view. If I am correctly informed, there are only two in the country, one of them a portrait of his pupil, Mr. John Selinger, of Boston, and now in his possession, and the other a study owned by Mr. W. M. Chase, of New York. But the artist has etched a number of very remarkable plates, and these can of course be studied here as well as elsewhere. Wilhelm Leibl's *œuvre*, so far as it has come under my observation, consists at present of a dozen plates,<sup>1</sup> nine of which are portraits or studies of heads. Only one of them has been published until now, *The Drinker*, said to be a portrait of Raueck, a saloon-keeper of Munich. The two *Heads of Peasants*, which accompany this article, were kindly furnished to the REVIEW by the artist himself. They were originally etched upon two separate pieces of copper, but are here printed of necessity from an electrotpe, which made it possible to unite the two upon one plate. The other plates include a portrait of the artist's mother, a study of the head, shoulders, and one hand of Horstig, a colleague of the etcher, and a variety of peasants, etc. Some of these plates—as, for instance, the two small ones of *A Girl*, and *A Man, Laughing*—are evidently earlier experiments, and the otherwise beautiful study of the artist Horstig is marred by a spottiness which one must overcome before being

<sup>1</sup> A complete set of these etchings is now on exhibition at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

able to appreciate it at its full value. All the plates have been worked with the finest points, and very closely modelled, evidently with a view to finishing the biting with only one immersion. That done they seem to have been left as they were, with no recourse, or at least very little, to even the dry-point and the burnisher. This gives them a somewhat hard and dry appearance, which is increased by the strong contrasts of lights and shadows. But all of them show that marvellous insight into human nature, that penetrating observation which is not stopped by the skin but searches into the innermost recesses of the soul, that rare talent for the combination of detail and largeness which is the grand quality of the best of Germanic art only,—in short, all those excellences which we have heard the French critic attribute to his paintings. It is a never-failing source of astonishment to notice the accidental character of movement and expression in these heads and figures, which seem to have been fixed as if by magic. They are photographically true in drawing, and yet to call them photographic would be an absurdity and an insult. For the photograph can never catch the fleeting inspiration of the moment as the artist has done here. Nor does that intimate characterization stop at the head. The hands are equally admirable and equally individual. As the *chef-d'œuvre* among Mr. Leibl's etchings I am tempted to name the *Old Peasant Woman leaning on her Staff*, a medium-sized plate measuring  $4\frac{3}{4}$  inches in breadth, by  $5\frac{7}{8}$  inches in height.

The artist has also etched three landscape studies, but, interesting though they are, they fall curiously short of his other work. So close an observer of human nature can hardly fail to be a close observer of inanimate nature also; and yet in the presence of these etchings a doubt arises on this point. The exaggerated lowness of tone—exaggerated even for the evening effects which these plates are evidently meant to represent—might perhaps be allowed to pass as having a certain poetry about it which it is difficult to deny. But there is a want of truth to nature in the disposition of the light, which cannot be got rid of. Even in the lowest twilight, when vertical objects, such as trees, houses, etc., are silhouetted in seemingly unbroken black against the faintly glimmering horizon, the ground is comparatively light, as it sends to the eye the reflected rays of the sky. But in the studies in question, the silhouettes and the ground are of the same value. The difficulty is owing, probably, to the method of etching employed. With stopping-out, the effect could have been made worthy of the careful labor bestowed upon these plates.

Wilhelm Leibl was born at Cologne in the year 1844. His extraordinary muscular strength at first induced him to think of becoming a blacksmith; but he soon recognized his true calling, and in 1867 went to Munich, where he studied at the Academy. In 1869 he removed to Paris, in which city he remained until the breaking out of the Franco-German war. Since then he has resided uninterruptedly in Munich and its vicinity. With an assured position at the age of thirty-six, the future lies before him bright and smiling.

S. R. KOEHLER.







W. LEIBL, PINX.

F. JUENGLING, SC.

THE OLD PEASANT AND HIS DAUGHTER.